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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE  
REGIONAL OFFICE  
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GOVERNMENT CENTER  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02203

AUG 5 1976

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Mr. John V. Sheehan  
Hospital and Medical District Director  
Boston Veterans Administration Hospital  
Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts 02130

Dear Mr. Sheehan:

We recently surveyed the outpatient medical and dental programs at the Boston Veterans Administration Hospital (BVAH), Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts and the Boston Independent Outpatient Clinic (BIOC), Boston, Massachusetts, and assessed the scope of the fee dental program through which veterans receive dental care from private dentists. 5252  
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BACKGROUND

Title 38 U.S.C., Chapter 17, Section 612(b), as amended by Public Law 93-82, provides that outpatient dental services and treatment, and related dental appliances, be furnished only to veterans of the Spanish-American War or Indian Wars or to veterans with a dental condition or disability--

- (1) which is service-connected and compensable in degree;
- (2) which is service-connected, but not compensable in degree, but only (A) if it is shown to have been in existence at time of discharge or release from active military, naval, or air service and (B) if application for treatment is made within one year after such discharge or release, except that if a disqualifying discharge or release has been corrected by competent authority, application may be made within one year after the date of correction or the date of enactment of this exception, whichever is later;
- (3) which is a service-connected dental condition or disability due to combat wounds or other service trauma, or of a former prisoner of war; or
- (4) which is associated with and is aggravating a disability resulting from some other disease or injury which was incurred in or aggravated by active military, naval or air service.

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Accordingly, veterans with non-service-connected disabilities are not eligible for outpatient dental benefits, and Public Law 93-82 did not extend these benefits to them.

INELIGIBLE VETERANS ARE  
RECEIVING DENTAL TREATMENT

Both the BVAH and BIOC dental clinics examine and treat patients in need of dental care. However, the BIOC has many more patients than can be treated in the clinic, necessitating sending veterans to private dentists for which the Veterans Administration provides fee payments for services rendered. Two-thirds of BIOC's dental outpatients, who are mostly veterans with service-connected dental disabilities, are treated by private dentists on a fee basis. The Dental Chief of the BIOC said that staff research, teaching, and training requirements prevent BIOC dentists from assuming a greater portion of the workload.

BVAH dental outpatients, however, are generally veterans with non-service-connected disabilities. Outpatient visits to the BVAH dental clinic are made by:

- veterans with service-connected and non-service-connected dental disabilities whose treatment had begun while an inpatient and continued after discharge on an outpatient basis (post-hospital),
- veterans with service-connected and non-service-connected dental disabilities admitted directly to the clinic via short form admission procedure and discharged the same day,
- hospital employees requiring emergency treatment, and
- veterans with service-connected dental disabilities referred from the BIOC.

Our review of 12 post hospital care records for veterans receiving dental treatment at BVAH showed that 11 were hospitalized for non-service-connected medical disabilities and one for a dental problem. None of the 11 met the conditions set forth in the law to receive outpatient dental services and treatment. The dental treatment for six patients began while they were inpatients, but the treatment for five did not begin until after they were discharged from the hospital.

The BVAH Dental Chief said that he was uncertain whether veterans with non-service-connected disabilities were eligible for follow-up dental care. He said that initial outpatient dental services were provided to the above five veterans either because the patient presented an interesting dental pathology or because the treatment was needed to improve the patient's general health.

Unless they meet the conditions of 38 U.S.C. 612(b), however, veterans with non-service-connected disabilities are not eligible for, and should not receive, outpatient dental treatment. Moreover, if the BVAH stopped treating ineligible veterans, it could treat nearby BIOC patients now treated by fee-basis dentists. This would significantly reduce BIOC dental fee costs which were \$669,898 in fiscal year 1976.

#### Short Form Admission Procedures

We noted that to treat some veterans for dental care, BVAH admitted them as inpatients for one day by using a short form hospital admissions procedure. This allowed the hospital to begin treating the veterans as outpatients since they were considered to have been hospitalized and treated as inpatients for one day. After this was brought to your attention, you instructed the Dental Service Chief to immediately discontinue the practice of admitting veterans for a period of one day for dental care. Since then, hospital dental admissions have been limited to service-connected disabilities and emergencies.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

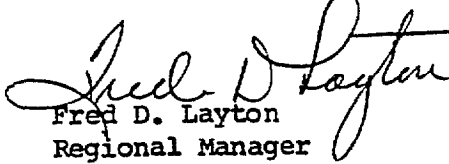
We recommend that BVAH:

- comply with 38 U.S.C. 612(b) by treating only patients with service-connected dental disabilities or with dental disabilities associated with service-connected medical disabilities, and
- coordinate work requirements with BIOC so as to treat as many BIOC patients as possible instead of having them treated by private dentists under the fee dental program.

We would appreciate being informed of any action taken or planned on the matters discussed in this report. Copies of this report are being forwarded to the Chief Medical Director and the Director, Internal Audit Service, VA Central Office.

We appreciate the courtesies and cooperation extended to our staff during this survey.

Sincerely yours,

  
Fred D. Layton  
Regional Manager

cc: Mr. George D. Peck (HRD)